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FREE AND OPEN CHURCHES.

A Sermon

PREACHED AT THE OPENING OF

THE CHAPEL OF CHRIST CHURCH,

PHILADELPHIA,

(Pine Street, above Nineteenth.)

BY THE

RIGHT REV. WM. BACON STEVENS, D. D., LL. D.,

BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE OF PENNSYLVANIA.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF THE BOARD OF MANAGEMENT
OF
CHRIST CHURCH CHAPEL.

PHILADELPHIA :

VALLETTE, HASLAM & CO., PRINTERS, 32 SOUTH SEVENTH ST.

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S E R M O N.

EZRA V, 9, 11.

“Who commanded you to build this house and make up these walls?”

“We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and build the house that was builded these many years ago, which a great King of Israel builded and set up.”

The opening of a new church is always an occasion of deep interest.

It is establishing an additional means of grace—it is opening a new well of salvation—it is setting “wide open” another “gate of Heaven.” To all these points of interest, there is added in the present case, the fact, that the Chapel now opened is a loving offshoot of the old Christ Church, and sets up here to-day her own household of faith, her own family altar, and her own holy worship.

Yet, as when a daughter leaves her mother’s house, and under a new earthly guide, establishes a new home, and surrounds herself with new domestic ties; there is no loss of maternal love, or of filial love, by reason of the child’s new position, but rather a tenderer love for the daughter by the mother, because of the unknown trials which may be before her; and a tenderer love for the mother by the daughter, because the daughter, now for the first time, begins to feel and appreciate a mother’s care, and guardianship; so here, there is no lack of love on either part, mother church, or daughter chapel; but the separation as to locality and ministry, only makes more tender and effective the

inner drawings of maternal instinct on the one hand, and the responsive outsprings of a daughter's affection on the other.

The primordial law of nature, enacted by God for the welfare of the human race, the great fundamental law of the domestic constitution, "increase and multiply," is also the primordial law of the Christian Church, that family of our Lord Jesus Christ "of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named." It is a going forth, the outward, onward movement of the household of faith, sending out its colonies and its families, ever lengthening its cords, ever strengthening its stakes, ever stretching forth the curtains of its habitations.

How wonderfully has this been done since Christ Church was first erected here one hundred and eighty-two years ago! Small and unpretending indeed was the vine, which, in 1695, was in the reign of William and Mary planted in this American wilderness, then filled with heathen tribes! Little indeed was the town with its three thousand people, which then lined the river bank and three or four streets back! Few and feeble were the colonies which then fringed the Atlantic coast! and only in some large towns, widely separated, could be seen the humble edifices, or be heard the Common Prayer, of the Church of England.

What a change does the outlook of to-day present! A "little one has become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation." The Vine that was planted in weakness, has taken deep root and "filled the land;" it has "sent out her boughs unto the sea, and her branches unto the river," and the continent is nearly covered with the shadow of it.

In this city the increase of population has been very great, and the growth of the Church most cheering. The more so, when we consider the special difficulties thrown in the path of the Church, and the peculiar trials within, as well without, which

depressed her during the period of the Revolution ; and the varied hostilities which have been sedulously arrayed against her since. This growth of the business of the city has resulted in driving population away from its old localities, and dispersing them mostly into the northern and western portions of the city. To meet this outspreading, and to keep within the fold of Christ Church those, who by reason of removal are too far away to attend at the old sanctuary ; which, in the words of the text, “was builded these many years ago,” it has been deemed advisable to “build this House and set up these walls,” and perpetuate by this organization, the illustrious ancestry of which it so justly boasts. This movement was rendered absolutely necessary if it was at all desired to hold together the old congregation, and keep up the ecclesiastical continuity of the Parish. By this plan it is hoped that much which Christ Church has lost by this westward movement may be recovered ; that the dispersed families, and even the children’s children, may be once more folded under the outstretched curtain of its habitation. And so, when in the course of time the demands of commerce shall absorb all the surrounding streets of the Old Church, and turn them into marts of merchandize, thus dimming the beams and contracting the light of this “morning star of our Church in this commonwealth,” it will find a new life and a new dawning here ; and as the light of the Old Church fades, it will be not be to set like the day-star of which Montgomery writes, which

“*Melts away* into the light of Heaven,”

but rather, it will be like Milton’s day-star, of which he says,

“So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed,
And yet anon repairs its drooping head,
And tricks his beams, *and with new spangled ore*
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky.”

Another special purpose of this chapel is, to illustrate and test the Free Church principle. This principle, as I hold it, consists of these points: That the Church of God, like the salvation wrought out by our blessed Lord, should be free for all. That God "is no respecter of persons," that the House of God should not be sold off in strips and square feet to men who can afford to outbuy others, and thus gain a right of property, real or personal, in a building given to, and by sacred rites, consecrated and set apart for, the worship of Almighty God. That the support of Divine Worship should be on the voluntary principle laid down in the Bible. "Let him that is taught in the word, communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things," and that as "they who wait at the altar, are partakers with the altar, even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel, should live of the gospel." These are the fundamental principles of the Free Church System. The principles are sound and biblical; but, like other schemes or theories, which equally rest on the Bible, which in themselves are equally reasonable, there are limitations to the *immediate* adoption of these principles, because of the present conditions of society, which seem to hinder their application. It will take a long while to change the present method of apportioning out the sittings in God's House. The usages of over three hundred years; usages, based on social distinctions, and kept up by these distinctions; usages, which plead the right and force of law by reason of age and universality of adoption; usages, which in truth, have in them many reasons of expediency and propriety; usages, which color and shape all our church-going habits and ideas: these usages are hard to change, and will require, as a preliminary, a clear and full setting forth of the true underlying principles of public worship. Only as we can show that the present pew system is not in harmony with the teaching of scripture, and is not productive of as

much good as another, is fraught with many and grievous evils, not the least of which is the virtual turning away of the poor man "in vile raiment" from the church—only as we steadily educate the people to these views, can we expect prejudices to give way, customs to be abandoned, and new methods to be put into practice. Violent denunciations of the pew system, and wholesale laudation of the free system, are not of much avail. The denunciation irritates, and the laudation disgusts, and neither proves anything but the unwisdom and arrogance of those who use them. What we want is calm inquiry of the Divine Oracles as to "what saith the Lord;" careful research as to the customs of the primitive Church; a diligent survey of the fungus-like growth of the pew system from its first appearance in England in the 14th century, until it has finally resulted in partitioning off the House of God into lease-holds or copy-holds purchasable and heritable; a true understanding of the real purpose and intent of the House of God; and a reception of, and practical application of, the truth; that the worship of God is to be supported, not by rent and taxes, but by voluntary gifts, elevating, giving to it right position in the Christian Church AS A GRACE in which it is our duty to abound.

As these ideas gradually make their way, they will change public opinion, and enable another generation to accomplish, what the present are prevented from fully doing, viz.: to proclaim and maintain, the perfect liberty, equality, and fraternity of all worshippers in the Lord's House of Prayer.

Here I must frankly say, that I do not endorse some of the arguments which are put forth by some of the advocates of Free and Open Churches, such as that "the altar stood higher in the estimation of the Apostles than the pulpit," that "sacraments not sermons were the special attraction and primary object of their Sunday assemblage," that human edification is not the chief or

primary purpose for which churches are erected, that "public worship is objective, not subjective; outward, not inward; active, not reflective." These and other like declarations put forth by some of the advocates of the Free Church Association,* are not, in my judgment, correct statements; and ought never to be used for the purpose to which they are now put. They have enough of truth in them to give them the currency of truth, but that truth is only so partially stated, or mixed with such alloy of error, as makes the whole statement intrinsically worthless as an argument on which to base any lasting system. I have not time, nor is this the place or the occasion, in which to dissect these specious assertions, and show how wide they are of Bible truth, primitive usage, and the whole drift and tenor of the teaching of our Church. But this much I can say, that there is no antagonism between preaching, which our Lord commanded his Apostles to do, and the Lord's Supper, which our Lord commanded his Apostles to celebrate. We cannot exalt one over the other; each has its distinct office and purpose. To disparage one, at the expense of the other, is to do injustice to Christ's own established ordinances, and make a one-sided, half-developed, and consequently imperfect public service. Each is necessary to the other; each has a Divine agency in man's salvation; each was instituted by our Lord Christ; and by means of each, the soul is edified and nourished in the Most Holy Faith. I rejoice to know that the plea for free and open churches does not rest on these statements. These might all be swept away, and the argument would be indeed the stronger, because the inquiring mind would not be prejudiced against the system, as it now is, by seeing these side-

* I refer particularly to a tract issued by the "Chester (England) Diocesan Open Church Association," entitled "What is public worship? and how is it affected by the pew system?"

issues made to act the part of pillars and supports of it. The system needs no such adventitious help ; it stands firmly on certain great truths of God's word, and certain great principles of Divine worship. It is based on arguments which address themselves to all reflecting minds. It is not, and never should be made, a party question ; and hence no shibboleths of party, or party statements, should be used in its advocacy. Its supporters are not of one school of thought, and it should be kept free from all complications with any. I speak thus decidedly because I feel strongly, both as to the importance of the Free Church Principle, and also as to the insidiousness of the errors instilled into the mind by some of the pamphlets circulated in its behalf.

Another important feature which it is hoped may be carried out here, is, *the keeping an open house of GOD*, as well as a free-seated house of GOD. Not simply opening the church for Sunday or daily service for an hour or two each day, as if the Lord of the temple was only at Home at such times, but leaving it open all day, so that at any hour the seeker after private meditation and prayer, can enter, and in the silence of the sanctuary, commune with his heart, and with his GOD.

There are many, and those too, not in the lower walks of life, but among the well-to-do classes, who, by reason of domestic difficulties or family arrangements, are unable to secure for themselves a private place for reading and prayer. Hence these most important duties are neglected, or discharged so imperfectly that they fail to beget the desired result. As a consequence, piety is dwarfed, the fruits of the Spirit, however promising at first, are blighted ; the race that began with zeal slackened in speed ; the life that was so full of hope wilts and languishes ; and the communicant while he "has a name to live," is spiritually dead or dying of that marasmus which consists of famishing for the bread of life and the water of life.

There are hundreds of nominally Christian households where there is no place for personal and private prayer, where there is no "closet" unto which they can enter, and no secrecy in which they can "pray to the Father that seeth our secret." There are many young men and women boarding in families, dwelling two or three or more in the same room ; there are many artisans and mechanics ; many salesmen and saleswomen ; many clerks and apprentices ; many seamstresses and school teachers ; aye many a mother and father of a family ; many a gentlewoman of intelligence and piety ; many a merchant of full occupation ; many a student fitting himself for some profession ; toiling men and women of all grades, from the highest to the lowest, to whom an ever-open church, with its quiet invitatory, its solemn stillness, its hallowed associations, its air of calmness and devotion, would be a great attraction and a lasting blessing, as offering to them not only the desired "silent hour," but also the "silent place" of meditation and prayer. I hold that this is proper and rightful use of GOD'S House. It is a house separated by the act of consecration "from all unhallowed worldly and common uses," and dedicated to GOD. And so we find in the prayer of consecration, the Bishop, as he stands up and turns his face to the congregation, not only specifies as special subjects of GOD'S regard "those dedicated to Thee in this house by Baptism ;" those "confirmed by the Bishop ;" those "who shall receive in this place the blessed sacrament of the body and blood of Christ"—those who hear the "word which shall be read and preached in this place"—those "who shall be joined together in the holy estate of matrimony ;" but there is added these significant words, "Grant, we beseech Thee, O Lord, that *whosoever* shall draw near to Thee in this place, to give thanks for the benefits which they have received at Thy hands, to set forth Thy most worthy praise—to confess their sins unto Thee, and to ask

such things as are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul, may do it with such steadiness of faith, and with such seriousness, affection and devotion of mind, that Thou mayest accept their bounden duty and service." This closing request of the consecration prayer, takes in all kinds of established services, and also covers just that personal and private use of its sacred walls, as shall cause the worshipper at all time to say, "surely God is in this House." "This is none other than the House of God, and this is the very gate of Heaven!" St. John, in Apocalyptic vision, says, "I looked, and lo a door was opened in Heaven," and the earthly gates to Heaven, like the Heavenly door itself, should stand wide open, symbolizing the openness and the freeness of the salvation offered; also the freedom of access to the new Jerusalem, that "mother of us all," of which it is revealed that "the gates of it shall not be shut at a l by day."

Though the public offering of sacrifices in the Jewish Temple was at nine and three o'clock each day, yet the gates of the Temple, and the courts of the Temple were set open from sunrise to sunset. Devout men and women all through the twelve hours resorted thither to offer unto God thanksgiving, to ask mercies, and to pay their vows unto the Most High. In the primitive Church, which was a feeble community struggling with an overbearing and life-crushing idolatry and Paganism; the early Christians worshipped almost by stealth, in the Cœnaculum as in Jerusalem, by the river side as at Philippi, in an upper room as at Troas, in the house of Justus as at Corinth, in the Catacombs as in old Rome. But as Christianity advanced, and got place and power, and built for itself churches, or had appropriated to it Basilicæ, then, as we learn from Theodoret, and Socrates, the historian, they were often used as places of private devotion and prayer; not only upon extraordinary occasions,

but, in some churches, “*cubacula*,” or little chambers, were built in the sides, to which persons could privately resort to read and meditate and worship.

In the Church of Rome, in the Greek Church, in the old churches of the Armenians and Nestorians and Copts, in Asia Minor and North-Eastern Africa, the doors of the church stand open all day, and the devout worshipper is ever welcomed within its walls. It is true that this custom has been greatly abused to superstitious uses, and persons resort thither to perform certain priest-imposed penances—to cross themselves with holy water; to make vows to the Virgin and the saints; to adore the exposed sacraments. But these evils are not the result of this custom; they are the growth and outcome of other seed, springing up in other soil. Were the things thus done themselves right, then there would be no question as to the rightfulness and propriety of this way of using the Church. But what we want to do, is, having a pure and spiritual worship—having none of these accessories of superstition—having none of these blasphemous deceits to entrap and beguile unwary souls; to use a thing *good in itself*, in *a good way*; and thus secure the true and pure blessings by means of the true and pure devotion which avails itself of such an open Church. By such a course men would soon come to realize the fact, that GOD did *inhabit* His House, not pay it occasional visits. That His eye and His heart “were there continually,” and not merely at certain times and seasons; and they would love the habitation of God’s House, and the place where his honor dwelleth.

I am well aware that objections will be made to this use of a church; that it will be stigmatized as Romish; that it will be opposed on economical grounds; that it will offend many of the steady church-goers, who think that this will be making the House of God too common; a resort for loungers; a meeting

place for improper purposes ; that it will subject the Church to theft and disfigurement and disease ; that it will drive away the staid and the wealthy and the refined ; and that it will be a stepping-stone to superstitious uses and abuses. Objections like these have met every advance of the Church out of the old stiff ways of former generations. Such objections confronted us when the Church began to build hospitals ; to establish sisterhoods ; to organize Parish guilds ; to introduce more frequent celebration of the Eucharist. We are getting accustomed to this kind of objection—these bugbears of fear and superstition that are ever rising in the onward path of the Church ; but if we wait till all these objections are reasoned down, and levelled by the syllogisms of an inexorable logic, we shall wait long and fruitlessly. Put the thing into action ; show it in its practical work, and it will live down opposition, and assert its excellence and power. If these plans and schemes are, as we believe, grounded on God's word ; if they are in accordance with primitive usage ; if they fall in with the very aim and object of Church structures ; if they are legitimately fostered by our formularies of devotion ; if they meet and supply a felt need in the human soul, and if we can conscientiously invoke upon them the blessing of Him who is no respecter of persons, and who has declared “ My House shall be a House of Prayer for all people, and I will make them joyful in my House of Prayer,” then may you be strong and of good courage in the way thus begun ; and if failure come, it will be, not because of any thing wrong in the principles, but because of something wrong in the practical application and adjustment of them to the necessities of the case.

Brethren, it is an interesting fact that three hundred and forty-one years ago this very ninth day of June, the Bishops and clergy assembled in convocation in London, petitioned King Henry VIII that the Bible might thenceforth be used by the people,

and accordingly, Cromwell, as Vicegerent of Henry, issued an injunction "that by August 1, 1536, every church should be provided with a Book of the whole Bible in Latin, and also in English, *for every man that will, to look and read therein.*" It is most appropriate, therefore, that this free and open church, should be officially opened on the anniversary of the day when for the first time in England, *a free and open Bible* was asked for by the clergy in behalf of the people. A free and open Bible, as the Word of God the Father—a free and open church as founded by God the Son, and a free and open dispensation of grace as established by God the Holy Host, the Divine Spirit who "bloweth where He listeth," constitute in their triune work, the whole scheme of grace as evolved in the counsels of the Triune God. They are inseparably united in the Divine mind, and heart, and work. Let them ever be united in the plans and schemes of those, who would be co-workers with God in the building up of the Redeemer's Kingdom.

And now we have inaugurated this Chapel. From this day forth its services are free to all; its doors are open to all. The bell which calls you here to prayer, is the same that called many of your ancestors more than a hundred and fifty years ago. The Liturgy in which you worship here, is essentially the same as that with which they came before the Lord their Maker. The sacraments of which you partake are the same as those administered by the long succession of Christ Church ministers, from its first pastor, the Rev. Thomas Clayton, to the present incumbent.

Lacking only twelve years of being coeval with the founding of this city by William Penn, Christ Church has ever been in the past, a spiritual power and blessing; and will, we trust, ever continue to be so in the future. For a long time it was the only Church of England Parish in the then new-born colony; now ninety churches and chapels are clustered around the old Mother

Church, thus beautifully realizing in spiritual things what Milton says of the Banyan Tree,

“ Which

In Malabar or Deccan spreads her arms,
Branching so broad and long, that on the ground
The bended twigs take root; and daughters grow
About the mother tree;—a pillared shade
High overarched, and echoing walks between.”

All Philadelphia, and all the Diocese of Pennsylvania, blesses God for the founding of Christ Church, “that was builded these many years ago” in the old regal days of William and Mary: and all invoke upon this beautiful child of its old age, and upon those who shall worship within these walls “now builded and set up” the benediction of the Triune God.

“ Come in, thou King of Kings, come in;
Rest here awhile, great Conqueror for good!
Bless thou this font, to cleanse from Adam’s sin;
Spread thou this table with celestial food,
And kindled by thy grace to gratitude,
May thousands here eternal treasures win.”

